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ABSTRACT

A communication skills training program for fathers of school-aged children was developed and evaluated. Eleven fathers, recruited from announcements distributed by community organizations serving a Boston neighborhood, participated in the program. A "non-equivalent" control group, similarly recruited, was also utilized. The program consisted of eight weekly 3-hour sessions focusing on attending, responding to content, responding to feelings, self-awareness, genuineness, and acceptance. Program effects were assessed in three areas: (1) the fathers' communication skills, (2) the children's perceptions of their relationships with their fathers, and (3) family systemic effects such as parents' satisfaction with their families and the congruence of mothers' and fathers' family concepts. Fathers, their wives, and one of their children were given pretests and posttests on the dependent measures. The program was found to result in an improvement in fathers' communication skills--specifically, a significant increase in their overall sensitivity, a significant reduction in their use of undesirable responses, a trend toward increased use of desirable responses, and a trend toward increased acceptance of their children's expression of feelings. Significantly more experimental than control group children perceived positive changes in their relationships with their fathers. An assessment of the family concepts of mothers and fathers indicated that fathers changed their views of the ideal family. (Author/RH)

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Communication Skills Training for Fathers of School-Aged Children

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Communication Skills Training for Fathers of School-Aged Children

Abstract

A communication skills training program for fathers of school-aged children was developed and evaluated. The program was found to result in an improvement in father's communication skills--specifically, a significant increase in their overall sensitivity, a significant reduction in their use of undesireable responses, a trend toward their increased use of desireable responses, and a trend toward their increased acceptance of their children's expression of feelings. Significantly more experimental than control group children perceived positive changes in their relationships with their fathers. An assessment of the family concepts of mothers and fathers indicated that fathers changed their views of the ideal family.

Communication Skills Training for Fathers of School-Aged Children

Until recently, men's active participation in parenting has been viewed as of minimal importance, and even as inappropriate (Nash, 1965; Josselyn, 1956). However, the importance of the father's role in child development has gained increasing recognition during the 1970's, in what Lamb (1979) has called an "era of paternal rediscovery." Moreover, increasing men's participation in family work (which includes parenting and housework--Pleck, note5) is a key issue for contemporary families and for society as a whole as women increase their participation in the paid labor force (Masnick & Bane, 1980).

Increasing men's participation in family work--specifically in parenting--may be facilitated by an educational intervention. Traditionally, men have not been prepared for an extensive role in parenting, either through family socialization or formal education (Hill & Aldous, 1969). This lack of preparation poses a difficult and even insurmountable obstacle for many men. The difficulties which men experience in developing an active parenting role have been highlighted in recent popular and professional examinations of fathering after marital separation (Kramer vs. Kramer, Jaffrey-1979; Keshet & Finkelstein, 1978). When there are no crises forcing men to develop an active parenting role, many men may choose to stick to the traditional pattern, as Eversoll (1979) have found, despite the fact that such a stance conflicts with contemporary social realities (Hoffman, 1977) or with one's idealized self-image (Anderson, 1977). Price-Bonham and Skeen (1979) have suggested that "fathers may be spending great amounts of time in their work role in order to avoid responsibilities of the father role because they lack the knowledge/

skills to be comfortable in the role." A similar view has been put forth by Sawin and Parke (1979).

Parent education for fathers has been a badly neglected area. First of all, the vast majority of popular parenting manuals explicitly or implicitly endorse the traditional roles of father as dominant breadwinner and mother as nurturant caregiver (DeFrain, 1977). Second, parent education courses have, until very recently, almost completely ignored fathers. A search of the current reviews of the literature on parent training (Berkowitz & Graziano, 1972; Bernal & North, 1978; Croake & Glover, 1977; Johnson & Katz, 1973; O'Dell, 1974; Reisinger, Ora & Frangia, 1976; Tavormina, 1974) found not one study which focused on the training of fathers, or which even indicated whether the "parent" group included fathers (Loiselle, Note 4).

Parent education is a complex field with a long history. Focussing on programs which educate parents in groups, the various approaches can be classified according to their pedagogical method and theoretical orientation. With regard to method, there are programs which emphasize group discussion and didactic methods (Auerback, 1968; Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964), and those which emphasize the systematic development of skills through a combination of didactic and experiental processes, including homework exercises (Gordon, 1976; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976; Patterson, 1971). With regard to theoretical orientation, programs have been developed from client-centered (Gordon, 1976), Adlerian (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976), behavioral (Patterson, 1971) and other orientations.

The present article reports the results of an evaluation of a parent education program for fathers of school-aged children (6-12 years). The program is a systematic skills program with a client-centered orientation.

Because fathers are thought to have more difficulty in the expressive role, the program emphasized communication skills.

Method

Procedure

A voluntary sample of fathers (N=11), recruited from announcements distributed by community organizations serving a Boston neighborhood, participated in the skills training program. A non-equivalent control group (N=11), recruited using the same procedures from two suburban communities, was utilized to assess the results. Both groups of fathers, their wives, and one of their children, were pre- and post-tested on the dependent measures before and after the program.

Subjects

The study was limited to married caucasian fathers with at least one school-aged child (6-12 yrs). The mean ages were: Fathers - 36.5 yrs., mothers - 36.5 yrs., focal children - 8.6 yrs. Sixty four % of the focal children were boys. The sample was middleclass: Average fathers' education was 16.4 yrs. and average family income was in the $20-25,000 range. The two groups differed on two demographic variables: Mother's age (experimental group wive's older) and religious affiliation (experimental group more diverse).

The Skills Training Program

The program consisted of eight three-hour sessions held weekly. The group was led by an advanced doctoral candidate in counseling psychology who

had experience with skills training and group work.

The program emphasized the development of communication skills and included sessions on attending, responding to content, responding to feelings, self-awareness, genuineness and acceptance (Levant & Doyle, Note 2). It included didactic and experiential components, as well as homework exercises contained in the Fathers' Workbook (Levant & Doyle, Note 3).

Dependent Variables and Measures

The effects of the skills training program were assessed in three areas: (1) The fathers' communication skills (overall sensitivity, desireable and undesireable responses, and acceptance) were assessed by the Sensitivity to Children Scale (STC--Stollak, Note 6) and the Porter Acceptance Scale (PAS--Porter 1954). (2) The children's perceptions of their relationships with their fathers was assessed by structured child interviews (Doyle, Note 1) and the Kinetic-Family-Drawings test (KFD--Burns & Kaufman, 1972). (3) Family systemic effects were assessed in terms of fathers' and mothers' satisfaction with their families, and the congruence of the family concepts of mothers and fathers, using the Family Concept Test (FCT--van der Veen and Olson, Note 7).

The STC consists of 16 problem situations to which fathers were asked to respond with written statements of what they would say if the child depicted in the situation were their own. The responses were classified as desireable, undesireable or neutral according to protocol (Doyle, Note 1). The PAS is a 40-item multiple choice questionnaire which was scored according to Porter's (1954) protocol. The structured child interview consisted of 31 items inquiring into the child's perception of his relationship with his father, and changes

in it which s/he would like to see or has seen. The interview was assessed according to protocol (Doyle, Note 1). The KFD is a projective test in which the child is asked to draw his/her family doing something, in order to tap into perceptions and feelings about family relationships. The KFD was assessed according to protocol (Doyle, Note 1). The FCT is an 80-item multiple choice test which assesses the individual's concept of the family as it is now (real family concept) and as s/he ideally would like it to be (ideal family concept). The test yields several scales: Family satisfaction (correlation between real and ideal family concepts); family congruence (correlation between family concepts of two family members). The latter can be based on real or ideal family concepts, yielding a real or ideal family congruence score. The test was computer-scored using van der Veen's program (van der Veen & Olson, Note 7).

Results

Data from the STC, PAS and FCT were analyzed using analysis of covariance, with the pretest scores as the covariates. The results are displayed in Table 1. The data from the structured child interview and the KFD were analyzed using Fisher's exact test.

Father's communication skills

Experimental group fathers improved their communication skills, with significant gains in STC total scores, significant reduction in STC undesireable responses, and a trend toward an increase in STC desireable responses. On the PAS experimental group fathers showed a trend toward improvement on subscale A

(acceptance or child's expression of feelings) which was the most relevant of the four subscales to the content of the program.

Children's Perceptions of Relationship with Father

On the structured interview, nine experimental children were judged to have perceived positive changes in their relationships with their fathers compared to three control children. This difference was significant (P=.015). On the KFD, six experimental children were judged to have perceived such positive changes as compared to one control child. This difference was also significant (P=.008).

Family Systemic Effects

The family satisfaction of experimental group fathers decreased significantly compared to control subjects. No differences were found between the groups on mother's family satisfaction, nor on real family congruence. However the ideal family congruence of experimental subjects decreased significantly compared to control subjects.

Discussion

The changes found in father's communication skills indicate the promising potential of this program. However it may be that the pattern of results represents a partial mastery of the skills, wherein fathers have learned well what not to do, but have yet to consolidate their ability to formulate desireable responses fluently. This line of reasoning would indicate that the program should be of longer duration.

The findings that children perceived positive changes in their relationships with their fathers is significant, indicating that the fathers may have been applying their learnings, and integrating them into their relationships with their children.

The findings from the FCT seem to reflect the fact that fathers learned a new way of thinking about family relationships which resulted in a change in their concept of the ideal family. This change accounted for the reduction in both fathers' family satisfaction (correlation of real and ideal family concepts) and father-mother ideal family congruence (correlation of mother's and father's ideal family concepts). Taking into account also the lack of change in mothers' family satisfaction and in father-mother real family congruence, the family concept findings as a whole seem to represent an evaluation of a process that has yet to run its course. That is, fathers have experienced a change in their concept of the ideal family, and have begun to implement it in their actual family, but by their estimate and that of their wives these changes have yet to be consolidated (an event which would be reflected by a change in real family concepts). These results indicate the desireability of a follow-up assessment.

In summary, the evaluation of the skills training program for fathers indicates that the program shows promise, but should be extended in duration by perhaps two to three weeks. A particular strength of the program seems to be its ability to encourage fathers to apply their skills to their relationships with their children, which may reflect the consistent emphasis on homework. Further research in this area is indicated.

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Table 1

Comparison of Training and Control Groups on Sensitivity to Children Scale, Porter Acceptance Scale and Family Concept Test, from Pre-test to Post-test.

Measure[a]	Groups				(b)
	Training (N=11)		Control (N=11)		
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	F ; P
Sensitivity to Children Scale					
Total Score					
Pre-test	12.10	1.64	11.82	1.33	
Post-test	16.12	2.71	12.88	2.64	3.14;.011**
Desireable Responses					
Pre-test	1.54	.52	1.18	.40	
Post-test	3.00	1.26	1.91	1.14	2.33;.141*
Undesireable Responses					
Pre-test	5.45	1.29	5.36	1.03	
Post-test	2.89	1.60	5.09	1.64	4.78;.042**
Porter Acceptance Scale					
Total Score					
Pre-test	135.82	12.57	140.82	9.88	
Post-test	144.10	12.06	143.55	14.14	1.00;n.s.
Subscale A					
Pre-test	32.91	5.84	34.36	5.57	
Post-test	39.37	5.40	35.54	5.54	3.55;.075*
Subscale B					
Pre-test	32.09	5.61	35.00	2.96	
Post-test	34.08	7.23	35.01	3.88	.13;n.s.